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SUBJECT: RUSSIA-FRANCE RELATIONS: AFTER KOUCHNER, BEFORE
SARKOZY

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's two-day Moscow visit did not bridge the gap in the two countries' position on issues such as Kosovo and Iran. Both GOR officials and the French Embassy hope that the early October Sarkozy visit will provide an opportunity to narrow differences and create a framework for more intensive bilateral cooperation, even as France elevates the issue of human rights in its bilateral dialogue. Moscow's non-official circles predicted that further progress would depend on Sarkozy's willingness to craft a Russia-friendly EU agenda. End summary.

Friends Indeed

¶2. (C) At a September 18 press conference following his one-on-one meeting with FM Kouchner, FM Lavrov, calling Kouchner "my friend," termed the Russia-France bilateral relationship one of a "special, privileged character." Lavrov, a colleague from Kouchner's 1999 - 2001 work in Kosovo, covered a wide range of issues including Iran, Iraq, Kosovo, the Middle East, Afghanistan and the North Caucasus. Lavrov did not spare Kouchner Moscow's dissatisfaction with EU actions on key contentious issues such as OSCE, missile defense, and NATO, while appealing for a "collective" consensus among involved parties, and for avoidance of unilateral actions. French Ambassador Laboulaye told us that the Sarkozy Moscow visit, originally planned for October 10-11, is likely to be moved up to the beginning of the month.

Kouchner: Man with a Message

¶3. (C) According to Laboulaye, FM Kouchner came to Moscow to deliver a tougher message to GOR leaders. A key element of that message, he noted, was Sarkozy's concern over conflicting signals from Putin and the unsuccessful March Samara Summit. Kouchner repeated emphasized that France's readiness to work towards closer relations with the U.S. would not preclude a close working relationship with Russia. At the same time, the Sarkozy government would be more vocal on human rights and on the situation in Chechnya. To drive home this point, Kouchner held a breakfast meeting with a mix of officials and non-governmental human rights figures and opposition political party leaders, gave an interview to Ekho Moskvyy Editor Aleksey Venediktov, and visited the offices of the newspaper where murdered journalist Anna Polikovskaya had worked.

Kosovo: Russia's Redline,
EU's Priority

¶4. (C) In his public comments, Lavrov lashed out against the prospect of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence (UDI), warning of a chain reaction in other regions (read:

Abkhazia) and called the Troika's December 10 deadline "artificial" and unacceptable. Both Deputy Foreign Minister Titov and the French Ambassador told the Ambassador September 19 that "nothing new" emerged from the ministers' discussions. Kouchner made clear that while France and the EU preferred a negotiated solution, the EU would be united in its position after December 10, without specifying the substance of that position. Lavrov pushed Kouchner on whether all 27 member states were inclined to recognize the UDI. Kouchner touched on the idea of a "CIS approach" to Kosovo -- a temporary union, leading to a referendum along the lines of Serbia and Montenegro -- an idea which he said would be broached by EU Troika Envoy Ischinger during his September 18-19 London sessions with the Serb and Kosovar Albanian delegations. (Titov's broader comments on Kosovo reported septel.)

Iran: Weekend Remarks Dominate

¶5. (C) Kouchner's remarks prior to arriving to Moscow on the need for preparedness for a war against Iran drew sharp criticism from Lavrov, who said, "No modern problem can have a military solution." The Russian FM said that the IAEA and the UN should take the lead on the international community's "collective" decision on Iran, avoiding "unilateral" sanctions. He insisted that a lesson be learned from the Iraq experience which demonstrated the consequences of unilateral action. Kouchner repeated his position: further sanctions, and more "precise" sanctions to "show that we are serious."

Chechnya Initiative

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¶6. (C) French Embassy officials expressed general satisfaction with the visit. One surprise was Kouchner's support for the NGO, "Etudes sans Frontieres" to open by September 2009 a House of Culture in Grozniy. Modeled after French cultural centers, the house will provide Chechen residents with access to information on Europe and language training.

Non-Official Views

¶7. (C) Worries in Russia about the bilateral relationship immediately following Sarkozy's victory subsided in the week of the Presidents' meeting at the Heiligendamm G-8. The two men were then portrayed as "similar" -- energetic, practical, self-confident, and prone to surprise the public. Sarkozy may not be another Chirac, well-versed in Russian literature and with a special fondness of Russia, but it is thought here that he may be someone with whom Putin could work. Our contacts highlighted Sarkozy's agility and adroitness in securing the Bulgarian medics' release and the French company Total's surprise "insertion" into the Shtokman project, announced after a Sarkozy - Putin phone call. Chief Editor for Russia in Global Affairs Fedor Lukaynov maintained that the two men "understand each other." While FM Kouchner's background, with his previous work in Kosovo and his keen interest in Russia's sore spot -- the North Caucasus-- is distasteful to the Russian leadership, Sarkozy has managed to disarm GOR officials, despite his plan to work more cooperatively with the U.S.

Comment

¶8. (C) Although the policy divisions were wide and clear during the Kouchner visit, the budding personal bond between the two presidents may well be solidified during Sarkozy's visit and be enough to advance the bilateral relationship, at least until next May when Putin steps down. The Russians want to view the French EUPresidency in the latter half of

2008 as the first meaningful opportunity to reassess the broader relationship with the EU.
Burns